



September 8, 2015

The Montana Primary Care Association  
1805 Euclid Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601

Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell,

On behalf of the Montana Primary Care Association, our 17 Community Health Center (CHC) members, and the more than 100,000 patients that we serve across Montana, I write to express our support for Montana's Medicaid expansion waiver.

Community Health Centers serve more than 1 in 10 Montanans. Half of our patients are uninsured and almost 60% fall below the federal poverty threshold, many of whom fall in the Medicaid coverage gap. While CHCs are able to meet the primary care needs of our patients, our patients lack access to comprehensive health care including prescription drugs, access to specialists, and inpatient care.

We are all too familiar with the stories of the individuals and families in the Medicaid coverage gap. These are the stories of Max Naethe from Kalispell, Montana. Max needs a heart transplant, but can't get on the transplant list because his is uninsured. He is able to see a primary care provider at the Flathead Community Health Center, but can't afford to see his cardiologist. A single father of two daughters, Max must stagger his prescription refills because he simply can't afford to pay for his medication and care for his children. Max is just one of thousands of our patients who faces these unbearable decisions each day.

The Montana Primary Care Association (MPCA) has long supported Medicaid expansion. MPCA supported expansion under traditional Medicaid in both the state legislature and through the ballot initiative process, but all of those efforts failed. The HELP Act was the result of a hard-fought bipartisan compromise and while far from perfect, the Act is the only vehicle that will ensure our patients and communities access to comprehensive health care. Hundreds of individuals, including Max, traveled over winter roads to support the HELP Act. Thousands of individuals called their legislators to express support for Medicaid expansion. MPCA worked with our Community Health Center patients to put names, faces, and personal stories on the 70,000 Montanans in the coverage gap. We wrote up those stories and shared them with legislators and the public and have included a few excerpts of those stories in this letter.



Failure to gain approval for Montana's waiver would undermine the bi-partisan efforts formed to pass the HELP Act and surely eliminate the possibility of expansion in the foreseeable future in Montana. The political pushback would likely undermine any efforts to address access to care beyond Medicaid, including the programs and services that address social determinants of health and populations health.

Failure to gain approval will result in delayed care, financial ruin, and unnecessary suffering for those living in the Medicaid coverage gap. For our patients who have complicated and chronic diseases, the coverage gap often means that their health slowly erodes because they are unable to get access to comprehensive care. When Health Center patient Holly Bloch first testified in support of the HELP Act in February of this year, she was able to travel despite renal failure and the need for a kidney transplant. In just the last six months, Holly's health has deteriorated so much that she is now in need of dialysis and her kidneys are functioning at less than 10% of their healthy capacity.

The Montana Primary Care Association fully supports the HELP Act. We acknowledge the limitations of the legislation, but recognize that for the more than 70,000 Montanans who fall in the Medicaid coverage gap, the Montana HELP Act is their only hope for access to comprehensive health care. If passed, we are committed to doing everything in our power to reach, enroll, and educate our patients and communities. We recognize that the waiver model of expansion and the cost sharing allowed by federal law create potential barriers to enrollment and utilization. MPCA and our allies are actively working to identify barriers and we are confident that we can address these challenges.

Despite potential challenges, we remain focused on the opportunity in the HELP Act. Medicaid expansion is a game-changer for our patients and communities. In the words of Helena Weaver, a 19-year-old woman in the coverage gap, "Medicaid expansion would give me hope. It won't fix everything, but it would mean that my grandma wouldn't have to worry as much. It would mean that I could have hope to one-day feel normal again."

We urge a swift approval of Montana's Medicaid expansion waiver. We appreciate your time and the opportunity to share our perspective.

Sincerely,

Bob Marsalli, Executive Director  
Montana Primary Care Association